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Year: 2015

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## **Afterword : Thomas Mann and Shakespeare : something rich and strange**

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Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich  
ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-113940>  
Book Section

Originally published at:

Bronfen, Elisabeth (2015). Afterword : Thomas Mann and Shakespeare : something rich and strange.  
In: Döring, Tobias; Fernie, Ewan. Thomas Mann and Shakespeare : something rich and strange. New  
York: Bloomsbury, 246-256.

## Afterword

### Elisabeth Bronfen

The explicit reference to *Love's Labour's Lost* in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* is the declared point of departure for far wider but also more tenuous links between the two authors which the essays in this collection set out to explore. Begun during the last years of World War II, Mann's 'Germany novel' targeted cultural antecedents to the national catastrophe of Nazi totalitarianism and its violation of human life. In inhuman abstraction and separation from the ordinary, it recognized something of both the German catastrophe and the twentieth-century avant-garde. Looking back in hindsight, and particularly in light of the holocaust, the demonic inspiration on which Adrian Leverkühn's twelve-tone compositions are shown to have been predicated compels us to consider not only the murky interface between politics and aesthetics which we have inherited from modernism. We are more specifically called upon to ask in what way Shakespeare's early modern imagination anticipates the ethical consequences of gravity getting lost in the course of a radical liberation from all constraints of the ordinary. One key issue in the transhistorical relations these essays trace is certainly the question of the degree to which Mann is indebted to Shakespeare; equally important, however, is the counter-move: how far could we read or perform Shakespeare today in light of the ways in which Thomas Mann understood the modern condition in part through his reading and engagement with Shakespeare?

For such an investigation into literary correspondences and connections, transcending as they do issues of acknowledged influence and explicit citation, I propose the critical term *crossmapping* so as to underscore the double move at work in the conversation between Mann and Shakespeare which this volume enables. On the one hand, one can claim that Mann maps certain constellations he finds in Shakespeare onto contemporary cultural and philosophical concerns in his novellas and novels. On the other hand, one can also claim that, given certain,

discernible analogies between both oeuvres (regarding character figurations, thematic concerns, word play and rhetorical strategies), it is equally fruitful and perhaps more revelatory to map onto a set of Shakespeare's plays the ways in which Mann's novels responded to their own contemporary cultural crises. Crossmapping thus entails using the historically later texts as the starting point for a speculation on their cultural origin and, in so doing, it looks at Shakespeare through the lens of his subsequent refiguration by authors who succeeded him, which here includes Mann but also intermediaries like Nietzsche and Wagner. Rather than simply proposing a relation of influence, crossmapping Mann and Shakespeare sheds light on neuralgic points that connect both cultural moments. The lines of connection opened allow us to read Shakespeare's plays as anticipating something that will come to be significant again in modernism, albeit in a different guise. At the same time, the sort of hermeneutic strategy assayed in this book can also help us set about discussing what Shakespeare can teach us about modernity, and in particular the troubled enmeshment of the political and the aesthetic, which *Doktor Faustus* traces back to Shakespearean comedy and which is so characteristic for modernism in general.

And yet, to uncover suggestive relations between an earlier and a later text not only allows us to discover those passages for which our readings may offer fresh meaning. Equally productive is the way in which, having found certain correspondences, the one text shines through the other precisely because the mapping in fact produces no perfect fit. Asking about the manner in which Shakespeare anticipates thematic and rhetorical constellations that will bear fruit *again* in modernism also means noticing seminal differences in the dramaturgic resolutions the renaissance poet offers. At issue is not just that a given oeuvre has had a resilient afterlife but also what shifts have occurred in the course of such cultural survival. If one of the most resilient lines of connection between these two oeuvres thrives on the tension between an escape into the aesthetic from the quotidian responsibilities of the world, and an ethical call to return to the gravity of the ordinary, then the closures Shakespeare's plays present also draw attention to the way difference nevertheless comes into play within the very survival of cultural energies his texts have engendered over the ages.

To take an example: Given that King Ferdinand's academy of men, separate from everyday society and predicated as it is on the excessive desire to exclude women, is the point of connection to *Doktor Faustus*, it is useful to remember that this experiment fails because he, along with his fellow scholars, falls prey to precisely the knowledge of women he has sought to ban. In Shakespeare it is the women who ultimately dictate the time and terms of the enforced return to the ordinary, with which this comedy of wanton verbal excess finds closure. Rosaline, the

Princess's witty attendant, is the one who speaks the lines so seminal to Mann's Germany novel: 'The blood of youth burns not with such excess / As gravity's revolt to wantonness' (5.2.73-4).<sup>1</sup> A revolt in the name of gravity, in other words, proves to be as excessive as what it revolts against: the promiscuous, the profusely luxuriant, the playfully lively. Important for the reinstatement of gravity on which this comedy ends, in turn, is that if King Ferdinand and his lords were initially guilty of a wantonness of wit, their ultimate debunking follows upon a second display of wantonness, now involving the manner in which they choose to court the women they had first sought to repudiate.

It is as a follow-up of her mockery of their ridiculous disguise as Muscovites that the Princess of France, having been informed of the death of her father, dictates an excessive collective return to gravity. She demands that King Ferdinand go to some 'forlorn and naked hermitage, / Remote from all the pleasures of the world' (5.2.777-8), while she will shut herself up in a 'mourning house, / Raining the tears of lamentation / For the remembrance of my father's death' (5.2.790-2). Berowne, in turn, is sent by his lady Rosaline to spend the year visiting those who are diametrically opposed to his verbal prowess, the speechless sick. With all the fierce endeavour of his wit he is 'to enforce the pained impotent to smile' (5.2.831). Shakespeare's answer to the sophisticated allusiveness of his courtiers brings what seems a contradictory compassion into play. Berowne may initially claim that 'to move wild laughter in the throat of death? / It cannot be, it is impossible: Mirth cannot move a soul in agony' (5.2.882-4), and yet he ultimately consents to the jesting in the context of real pain upon which his lady insists.

By looking back at the Shakespearean text through the lens of Mann's appropriation, my interest is drawn to the fact that it is the women who successfully fuse an ethical acknowledgement of the inescapable law of mortality with a subversive creativity, and in a manner particularly compelling – once again – for art performed in the aftermath of the global catastrophe of political totalitarianism. In Mann's Germany novel, wantonness, of course, plays itself out in yet a further sense of the word, namely as deliberate and unprovoked cruelty. With this in mind, we may glean from Shakespeare's closure not just a lament regarding the impossibility of finding a poetic and critical language that might adequately represent Auschwitz. Of continued pertinence, also, is the recognition that in the face of death a recourse to the wantonness of poetic words, the very excess that makes this mode of expression both wildly contingent and uncontainable, might just be the only adequate manner in which to record and counter global suffering. In that it not only gives final authority to the voices of women but also invokes the possibility that a comic restitution may still – after the long

proposed twelvemonth of separation – be an option, Shakespeare's call to self-restraint and a re-anchoring of wit in the ordinary world seems different from Mann's conviction that after Auschwitz there is no redemption in sight. My intuition is that in turning back to Shakespeare's sense of the limit which the facticity of death imposes on all poetic imaginations – even while his comic resolution proposes that aesthetic refiguration of the world finds its most compelling challenge when faced with real suffering – we might find the beginnings of fresh answers to Mann's disillusionment in regard to the destruction which World War II wrought.

But as much as we may wish to keep totalitarian politics and art neatly distinct, what the conjunction of Mann and Shakespeare suggests is that we must instead address the disturbing links between them. On the one hand, we would like to hold on to the discrepancy that while Nazi ideology valorized authenticity, resoluteness, health, strength, and a redemptive final solution (the so-called *Endlösung*) based on exterminating all cultural qua racial difference, the modernist aesthetic response entailed a celebration of the inauthenticity of masquerade and surface appearances, sickness, the impure and infected, along with anti-cathartic closures and open ends. But Leverkühn's musical adventure is not just a trope for the masculine artist's desire to avert the ordinary, and separate artistic prowess from sensual happiness. The political analogy intended by Mann sheds disturbing light on the fact that the 'demonic' music his musician invents, the twelve-tone composition, is not just predicated on a freedom from any considerations of musical conventions. It entails above all a strict style ('einen strengen Satz', 2007: 280-1) that ideally leaves no more free notes ('keine freie Note mehr', *ibid.*).<sup>2</sup> Each tone in the complete composition is to be determined by this series. Put another way, the series allows for no note to exist outside what it determines.

What links Leverkühn's aesthetic ideal to the ideal of fascism is the fact that both repudiate anything subjective, contingent or random. Read as a trope for a different demonic liberation, namely the Nazi regime, our attention is uncannily drawn toward a proximity between the avant-garde and political totalitarianism here. The neat distinction that attributes a transparent and harmonious articulation to the political realm and the embrace of opacity and disjunction to the aesthetic gives way to a different ordering, in which both the aesthetic and the political, by presupposing a freedom from all considerations of conventions, are shown to be aligned in that there is no outside allowed by their totalizing claim. The demonic – when read as a political trope – proves to be difficult to fix in place. On the one hand, pitted against the humanist project which Mann's bourgeois citizen Zeitblom represents, it entails a mistrust of the progress of

enlightenment and goes against any return to the ordinary predicated on a containment of excessive desire in the interest of human benefit. On the other hand, the demonically inspired political system imposes on the ordinary an all-encompassing law, predicated on radical exclusion, sacrifice and extermination of all those forms of life that do not fit the determining series.

Mapping Mann's notion of the demonic as inspiration for a series which contains no free notes back onto Shakespeare, a poignant difference for the political implication in the early modern dramatist's aesthetic design emerges. Polyphony, on the level both of his poetic language and of his constellations of character, brings with it an awareness of the fragility and provisionality of any all-embracing power in the theatre or in politics. Rosaline and the Princess of France may seek to put an end to all wanton wit, and yet the return to gravity they insist on does not preclude the existence of free notes. Indeed, at the end of Shakespeare's plays there is always something that doesn't fit into the series: be it the discontented Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, who threatens to have his revenge on the whole pack of courtiers who had their fun with him; be it Antonio, who, bereft of his lover at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, has only the hope that his ships will come home safely; be it the hysteric Ophelia, who, drawn from her delirious singing to muddy death, subverts the lethal theatre of conspiracy into which Hamlet has drawn the entire court at Elsinore. The ordinary these plays ultimately return us to is precisely one that defies a structuring of the world so strict that nothing cannot *not* fit. To return once more to our primary example: in *Love's Labour's Lost* the answer to an academy in which women's voices have no place is not only including them contrapuntally, but, in following their lead, to force open the imposition of a strict series in order, instead, to confront the incalculabilities and contingencies of the real, especially where death and suffering must be accounted for. In light of the fact that the experience of military destruction throughout the twentieth century has caused critical theory not only to feel uncomfortable with any celebration of harmonious totality but also to doubt the humanist project, asking of art to reflect this two-fold distrust, Rosaline's command that Berowne test the effect of poetic wit not by repudiating life's fragility but in the face of real suffering continues to be timely.

Indeed, as Jonathan Dollimore points out in his contribution to the present volume, a particularly suggestive line of association between Thomas Mann and Shakespeare emerges when discussing *Hamlet* in relation to a knowledge which shatters in that it puts into question psychic, social and political well-being – a knowledge, that is to say, which makes this well-being questionable by turning it into a question and an issue of self-questioning. It is precisely in the turn toward all

that is excluded from the ordinary – the nocturnal, the excess of desire, fantasy as a violation of others, death – that a resilient cultural afterlife of Shakespeare in modernity can be located. Though shattering to any comfortable notion of the self, the community or the nation, this dangerous knowledge pertains to something we cannot afford *not* to know. Yet most pertinent about a conception of modern art as that which disturbs any unquestioned experience of and existence in the world is that, by rendering the ordinary uncanny, the cognitive gain is a double-edged ethical insight. Revisiting the conversation between Mann and Shakespeare, Dollimore offers a keen rethinking of the term *Barbarei*, so as to suggest that barbarism is not the opposite of the civilization it seeks to destroy but its creation – a self-destructive force that civilization itself engenders. Art, in turn, emerges not only as a corrective, but also a particularly potent articulation of the virulent intensity this second degree barbarism unleashes.

In Shakespeare, of course, the proximity between evil and good harks back to an omnipotent God who, having created both, emerges as the source of evil. There is nothing outside or beyond divine power. For Mann, in turn, the proximity between barbarism and civilization speaks to the way that the 'demonic evil' of Nazism cannot be neatly severed from the German people at large and instead must be tracked back to the bourgeois humanist project against which it was pitted. Linking both, the scene in *Doktor Faustus* during which Leverkühn assures the devil that the tempter is telling him nothing save things that are already in him recalls *Macbeth* in more than one sense. On the one hand, the eponymous hero of the play, like Satan, so brilliantly portrayed in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, was once a loyal subject whose rebellion against his sovereign is inspired by both the barbarism of the battlefield and the conjuring powers of the witches, who give him the script of ambitious promotion which he will follow, once circumstances favour him. Yet these allegedly demonic forces, rendering manifest the latent rebellious thoughts in this particular warrior, are themselves subject to Hecate, goddess of dark places, who allows her wanton subordinates to trick Macbeth so as to bring about his destruction and reassert the royal lineage he, for the duration of the play, seems to subvert. As such, her nocturnal force orchestrates a drama in which a powerful general is drawn into the realm of revolt and regicide, so as to prove not only the temptability of even the most loyal subject but, by virtue of his ultimate defeat, also to make an example of his subversive defiance.

The bloodshed and destruction of the world we witness on stage is not in opposition to, but in alliance with the sovereignty of King Duncan's family line. Violation is engendered *by*, but also once more results *in*, the civilization this weak king represents. At the same time,

the murky interface between good and evil is also explicitly addressed by Malcolm, heir to the throne, as an equally conflicted expression of the proximity between evil and good. In the fourth act, Malcolm gives voice to the black scruples that devilish Macbeth has inspired in him, claiming, to his astonished companion Macduff, that in his voluptuousness and avarice he is equal to the evil usurper. After listing all his vices, he proclaims 'Nay, had I power, I should / Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, / Uproar the universal peace, confound / All unity on earth' (4.3.98–100). Only the despair his companion utters in response, regarding the fate of Scotland, compels Malcolm to unspeak his own detraction and abjure the stains and blames he initially laid upon himself. Yet the point is that in order to renounce evil, Malcolm chose to acknowledge it as being – at least potentially – part and parcel of the sovereignty he is about to claim. In so doing, he raises the possibility that he could be one in a series of evil rulers, engendered by his father King Duncan's weak regime. Choosing civilization over barbarism only cements the proximity between these two political forces.

What Shakespeare thus maps is not the narrative of a logical sequence in which the barbaric is conceived as coming before and then being overwhelmed by enlightened civilization, such that its re-eruption marks a reversion to a prior state. Instead, with Mann's notion of shattering knowledge in mind, we see barbarism as the logical consequence of a particular civilization, in *Macbeth* the medieval Scotland of King Duncan. There it finds two embodiments, as the usurper and his challenger, and only the triumph of the latter puts an end to the sequence of bloodshed by regrouping all the Thanes loyal to Malcolm into a far stricter bond of Earls, led by him as their new sovereign. The king-maker Macduff is demonstratively holding the head of his vanquished opponent in his hand as Malcolm proclaims this new political regime. Mann calls the re-eruption of violence in the midst of civilization a double barbarism, as the devil puts it to Leverkühn, coming after bourgeois humanism. As Dollimore suggests, this is an answer to the bourgeois civilization which, by privileging a project of humanitarianism without allowance for excess, not only re-engenders but actually intensifies the very violations it seeks to contain, be these sexual passions, mystical passions or the passion of violence. Rethought in Shakespearean terms, this also brings us back to the excess to be found in Rosaline's final call for gravity's revolt against wantonness. At the height of modernity, in the form of European fascism, the gravity of civilization found itself giving in to wanton political action, whose violence in its excessive cruelty can be conceived as an alarmingly grave wantonness. While it is relatively acceptable to think of gravity and wantonness conjoined in the Elizabethan court,

where civilizing love and destructive desire existed side by side, when gravity and wantonness come together in the Nazi regime it blurs together things we would far rather keep distinct. German totalitarian politics was everything but undisciplined and lawless, even while committing crimes against humanity. It puts on display how a lasciviously wanton violence could emerge as part and parcel of an extremely organized project of modernity.

What is timely about the notion that evil is not external to but inherent to the good, and as such not what civilization triumphs over but what it also produces, is not simply the deconstruction of familiar binaries. Rather than collapsing the distinction between barbarism and civilization, crossmapping Shakespeare and Mann suggests that it may be more fruitful, given the proposed proximity, to isolate those historical moments as well as those literary passages that address their cross-over. Our attention is then drawn to the fact that, by both correcting and articulating a barbarism which comes after and as a result of civilization, modern artistic practices participate in a dynamic dialogue. Along the lines of what Freud calls the uncanny return of latent primordial material, it is this dialogue that gives voice to the repression of a dangerous knowledge. Freud himself explicitly conceived the primordial aspect of psychic life in terms of a barbarism that had to be repressed in favour of both individual and collective culture. As Dollimore notes (in his contribution to this volume, p. 28), while repression thus proves to be a 'necessary aspect of what it means to be humane', the demonic force it seeks to contain is part and parcel of what it means 'to be fully human'. Like Satan, returning from Hell to challenge the God who exiled him, repressed psychic material returns in the form of personal and collective symptoms and fantasies, giving voice in encrypted form to something we cannot afford *not* to know because, as shattering as this knowledge is, it is also all too human.

Freud begins his 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', written one year after the outbreak of World War I, with a confession of his own distress. The war, he explains, that 'we had refused to believe in broke out, and it brought – disillusionment' (1964: 278)<sup>3</sup> regarding all trust in humanism, civilization, progress. The furore driving his fellow Europeans into this Great War, which within the first year had resulted in such unexpectedly high casualties, Freud took to be an expression of discontent with the pressure of civilization. So as to make sense of the violence and destruction of war, he suggested an analogy between the early psychic condition of the human subject and what he called 'primaeval man' (1964: 292).<sup>4</sup> This allowed him to think about the war in terms of a re-eruption of barbarism in the heart of European civilization both in personal and in collective terms; as the uncanny return of something which was not so much strange as it was all too familiar.

For Freud, the shattering knowledge which the outbreak of war forced upon all those who had refused to believe it could break out, however, at the same time revealed a troubling association between aestheticism and barbarism. The tendency of civilized society 'to exclude death from our calculations in life' (1964: 291),<sup>5</sup> which is to say to repress the human in support of the humane, entails a 'loss in life' which finds compensation in the world of fiction: 'There we still find people who know how to die – who, indeed, even manage to kill someone else. ... In the realm of fiction we find the plurality of lives which we need. We die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him, and are ready to die again just as safely with another hero' (ibid.).<sup>6</sup> And yet Freud, adding the following chilling remark, underscores the proximity of death and life, evil and good, barbarism and civility: 'It is evident that war is bound to sweep away this conventional treatment of death. Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it. People really die; and no longer one by one, but many ... and death is no longer a chance event. To be sure, it still seems a matter of chance whether a bullet hits this man or that; but a second bullet may well hit the survivor; and the accumulation of deaths puts an end to the impression of chance. Life has indeed become interesting again; it has recovered its full content' (ibid.).<sup>7</sup>

Dollimore's provocative claim that 'humanism involves a repression of what it is to be fully human, and that such repression is a necessary aspect of what it is to be humane' (this volume, p. 33), locates a potential in modern art that places it not only in the service of human values which support the containment of lethal fantasies and desires on which civilized life is predicated. Instead, as a cognitive instrument, modern art also supports the shattering knowledge that exceeds and violates civilized life by forcing into view again all that humanism feels compelled to exclude and repress. It is not an anaesthetic insensitivity to pain that Rosaline prescribes to her witty lover's skill with words. The aesthetic she has in mind at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* is not one that aims even to heal the wounds which life inflicts on human beings, but one which actively brings the ugliness of disease, decay and death back into the equation. Rosaline's final, hopeful prescription for the aesthetic involves wantonness once more turning alarmingly grave.

The humane, intent on civilizing and refining so as to reduce pain, and the human, mutually implicated in good and evil, relate to each other in such a way that the former covers up the latter even though it never fully screens it out. If the humane speaks to that part of our existence that is steeped in suppressing all that is in discord with notions of benevolence and civility, we may think of the letter 'e' with which this word ends as the decisive mark of something more than the repression of what it is to be fully human. It also marks the limit to

any civilizing effort in excluding what doesn't fit in with the humanist project. Dropping the 'e' allows us to find in the human the dissident and dangerous knowledge which the humane seeks to avert. And the human thus returns in full force, recovering, as Freud puts it, life's full content. My intuition is to turn the screw one notch further regarding the proximity of aesthetics and an attack on bourgeois humanism. If the human is that which brings back into the conversation what the humane seeks to disavow, the absent 'e' opens up an artistic practice in which barbarism is harnessed not in the name of human values, but in opposing aesthetic compositions of strict series in which nothing is contingent, incalculable, or out of place.

To return to Shakespeare *after* and *with* Thomas Mann could entail putting the human back into the artistic equation by tuning our ears to those textual passages that challenge, threaten and repudiate any ideal – be it aesthetic or political – that allows for no free notes. This, I have argued, is what Rosaline speaks for, in the form of a discipline she teaches to her excessively cultivated man. Rather than seeking redemption from the past (and with it our cultural legacy of barbarism), the double-edged challenge to art is to foreground the human in all its ugly inconsistency and disjunction even while recognizing our need for the civilizing assuagement which the humane offers. Yet if, as Dollimore points out, modern culture's sublation of the human into the humane also produces the return of a knowledge that shatters, albeit transformed and re-encoded by virtue of its repression, this rhetorical turn is also applicable to Shakespeare's effective cultural survival in modernity. What a transhistorical crossmapping uncovers are not just the lines of connection and correspondences between early and late modern texts, but that Shakespeare's meaning returns to us inscribed by and intensified by the history of his rearticulations. The aesthetic energies emanating from his poetic refiguration of the cultural anxieties and crises of his own times are both prior to our contemporary concerns and the product of rethinking our historical moment in light of his plays.

## Notes

- 1 All Shakespeare quotations are from the Norton edition, based on the Oxford text, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean Howard and Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York 2008).
- 2 'I will tell you what I understand by "strict style". I mean the complete integration of all musical dimensions, their neutrality towards each other due to complete organization ... There would no longer be a free note' (Mann 1999: 191). *Ich werde Dir sagen, was ich unter strengem Satz verstehe.*

*Ich meine damit die vollständige Integrierung aller musikalischen Dimensionen, ihre Indifferenz gegen einander kraft vollkommener Organisation. ... Es gäbe keine freie Note mehr. (Mann 2007: 280–1).*

- 3 *Der Krieg, an den wir nicht glauben wollten, brach nun aus und er brachte die – Enttäuschung (Freud 1999: 328).*
- 4 *dem Urmenschen (ibid.: 347).*
- 5 *den Tod beiseite zu schieben, ihn aus dem Leben zu eliminieren (Freud 1999: 341).*
- 6 *Dort finden wir noch Menschen, die zu sterben verstehen, ja, die es auch zustande bringen, einen anderen zu töten. ... Auf dem Gebiete der Fiktion finden wir jene Mehrheit von Leben, deren wir bedürfen. Wir sterben in der Identifizierung mit dem einen Helden, überleben ihn aber doch und sind bereit, ebenso ungeschädigt ein zweites Mal mit einem andren Helden zu sterben (ibid.: 344).*
- 7 *Es ist evident, daß der Krieg diese konventionelle Behandlung des Todes hinwegfegen muß. Der Tod läßt sich jetzt nicht mehr verleugnen; man muß an ihn glauben. Die Menschen sterben wirklich, auch nicht mehr einzeln, sondern viele .... Es ist auch kein Zufall mehr. Es scheint freilich noch zufällig, ob diese Kugel den einen trifft oder den anderen; aber diesen anderen mag leicht eine zweite Kugel treffen, die Häufung macht dem Eindruck des Zufälligen ein Ende. Das Leben ist freilich wieder interessant geworden, es hat seinen vollen Inhalt wiederbekommen (ibid.).*

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# Thomas Mann and Shakespeare

*Something Rich and Strange*

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Tobias Döring and Ewan Fernie

Bloomsbury Academic

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**Bloomsbury Academic**  
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

1385 Broadway      50 Bedford Square  
New York      London  
NY 10018      WC1B 3DP  
USA      UK

[www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)

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Publishing Plc

First published 2015

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Thomas Mann and Shakespeare : something rich and strange / edited by  
Tobias Döring, Ewan Fernie.

pages cm. -- (New directions in German studies)

Summary: "The first ever comparative reading of Shakespeare and Thomas  
Mann in view of key questions in modern culture"-- Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-62892-209-7 (hardback) -- ISBN 978-1-62892-210-3 (ePub) --

ISBN 978-1-62892-211-0 (ePDF) 1. Mann, Thomas, 1875-1955--Criticism

and interpretation. 2. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616--Criticism  
and interpretation. 3. Mann, Thomas, 1875-1955--Themes, motives.

4. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616--Themes, motives. 5. Comparative  
literature--German and English. 6. Comparative literature--English and  
German. I. Döring, Tobias, editor, author. II. Fernie, Ewan, 1971- editor,  
author.

PT2625.A44Z891666 2015

833'.912--dc23

2015011135

ISBN: HB: 978-1-6289-2209-7

ePub: 978-1-6289-2210-3

ePDF: 978-1-6289-2211-0

Series: New Directions in German Studies

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN  
Printed and bound in the United States of America

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## Acknowledgements

This volume started life as a remarkable conference, generously supported by the Center for Advanced Studies, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. We are profoundly grateful to Sonja Asal and to our speakers for doing so much to make it as stimulating, fulfilling and enjoyable as it was. We should also like to acknowledge the gracious contribution of Regina Schwojer in running the conference, and the crucial efforts of Elisa Leroy and Johannes Ungelenk in preparing it, which extended to providing elegant as well as accurate translations for the book. Yola Schmitz's labours as editorial assistant on a sometimes fiendishly difficult bilingual undertaking are greater than that modest title can express. And Martina Kübler made a decisive intervention as we finished preparing the manuscript. Karin Brown offered expert help at the Shakespeare Institute Library. We are grateful to Haaris Naqvi at Bloomsbury for being so genially encouraging and efficient an editor. And finally for enabling this particular pioneering conversation between English Studies and *Germanistik*, between criticism and creativity, and between Germany, Switzerland, the UK and the United States, we should like to express our sincere and continuing gratitude to Thomas Mann and Shakespeare.

Tobias Döring and Ewan Fernie